

“Knowing” Strengthened by “Knowing About”: A Reflection Precipitated by Jonathan G. Bayley’s “Music Education in Saskatchewan: An Outsider’s Perspective”

Victoria Meredith

The University of Western Ontario

In the official Government of Saskatchewan description of Arts Education cited in Jonathan Bayley’s article, “Music Education in Saskatchewan: An Outsider’s Perspective,” the declared sole aim of Arts Education in Saskatchewan is “to enable students to understand and value arts expressions throughout life.” Similar to the Ontario Ministry of Education music curriculum’s components of *theory*, *creation*, and *analysis*, Saskatchewan’s *creative*, *cultural/historical*, and *critical/responsive* strands appear to seek a balance between the “knowing” achieved through experiencing an art and the “knowing about” gained through historical and analytical study.

The notably divergent approaches to music/arts teacher training provided by the province’s two universities appear to represent varying interpretations of the Arts Education guidelines as well as opposing beliefs as to what the best way might be to prepare teachers to achieve the expressed ideal. Perhaps one of the primary differences between the generalist/arts approach and a predominantly performance-based approach is one of balance – how much time and attention are devoted to making music in the form

Meredith, V. (2007). “Knowing” strengthened by “knowing about”: A reflection precipitated by Jonathan G. Bayley’s “Music education in Saskatchewan: An outsider’s perspective.” In K. Veblen & C. Beynon (Eds. with S. Horsley, U. DeAlwiss, & A. Heywood), *From Sea to Sea: Perspectives on Music Education in Canada*. Retrieved from <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/musiceducationebooks/1/>

of performance or composition versus how much time and attention are directed to the study about the history, context, and analysis of music.

There are two distinct questions that arise from Bayley's description of the two approaches to music education in Saskatchewan. First, what is the most appropriate and effective way to teach music? Is it from the generalist/arts perspective focusing equally on "knowing" and "knowing about" with perhaps more attention devoted to the non-performance aspects of the subject than to the performance side and taught by an arts generalist? On the other hand, is a performance-based approach, taught by a specialist, preferable? Or, might there be a hybrid approach that could be even more effective than either of these alternatives, each of which could be incomplete when implemented in the extreme? Also worthy of consideration is the possibility that not every teaching situation should be met with the same approach. It is entirely possible that what is best in one circumstance might not be optimal in another.

The second question that Bayley introduces deals with "what is the most appropriate teacher training for individuals engaged in teaching music"? If a person is trained as an arts generalist, does that person also have sufficient skill to bring to the performance aspect of the subject? From a common sense perspective, it would seem more feasible for a skilled musician/teacher to expand his or her abilities and training to include leading students toward an understanding of the context of the music studied as they think and critically discuss and analyze the subject than it would be for an individual who possesses a general understanding of several arts forms but lacks in-depth experience in any one of the arts to be able to guide students to a level of creative performing or composition that would allow them to actually "know" the art. It would

Meredith, V. (2007). "Knowing" strengthened by "knowing about": A reflection precipitated by Jonathan G. Bayley's "Music education in Saskatchewan: An outsider's perspective." In K. Veblen & C. Beynon (Eds. with S. Horsley, U. DeAlwiss, & A. Heywood), *From Sea to Sea: Perspectives on Music Education in Canada*. Retrieved from <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/musiceducationebooks/1/>

seem that if the teacher only “knows about” the various arts, then that will be the level of understanding shared with his or her students.

One hybrid approach might be described as a balanced performance-based program. Such a program allows students to gain the literacy and understanding of music only accessible through actually making music coupled with the added perspective of historical/contextual/analytical study of the music performed, with a time ratio of about 75% performance focus/25% non-performance focus. Both the Saskatchewan and Ontario guidelines could be interpreted in a way that would accommodate such a program. Perhaps this was even the original intent. This type of balance could have the added advantage of enhancing the level of the performance experience on the one hand while bringing the non-performance aspects more clearly into students’ understanding through application. Surely, the performance of music does not exclude the possibility of also studying music from a non-performance perspective. However, to introduce students solely to the non-performance aspects of music would seem to deprive them of a genuine understanding of the essence of the art. While the generalist/arts approach described for Saskatchewan schools does identify a “creative/productive component,” the statement that “in order for an activity to be creative, the student must be actively engaged in a critical thinking process” leaves the impression that even in actual music-making, it is the thinking about it that is most important. This is not to imply that performance is a non-thinking activity. Far from it. However, sometimes in order to gain the full benefit of music making it is necessary to go beyond talking about it and get on with the music!

At this point, humanist psychologist Csikszentmihalyi’s description of the autotelic nature of music-making and other activities comes to mind—when challenge

and skill are well matched and the motivation for the activity comes from within, with the music itself as its only purpose. To be able to lead students toward such an experience requires development of individual skill on the part of the student matched with ever-increasing and appropriate challenges guided by a well-informed teacher, resulting in a high level of concentration, strong self-motivation, and intensified learning. While understanding what they are doing and why they are doing it is an important part of educating students, Csikszentmihalyi's research indicates that there are times when the actual performance experience is of a non-verbal, experiential nature, going beyond the critical thinking process.

Every individual teacher brings his or her own strengths to each teaching situation. As a result, even when a curriculum is clearly prescribed, no two classroom experiences will be exactly the same. There are no doubt excellent music programs in both the generalist and performance-based genres. Bayley's self description as "a musician who was a music educator" seems ideal. Surely the teacher who enters his or her students in a music festival with students holding instruments incorrectly (such as putting trombones together backwards or holding the clarinet with the wrong hand on top—real situations observed by adjudicators in festivals) has been incompletely trained and puts his or her students at a distinct disadvantage in terms of actual musical experience and learning, regardless of how well they are able to discuss the topic. At the same time, the teacher/conductor who devotes an entire semester attempting to "perfect" the three pieces to be played at that year's festival in the hope of making a strong showing also short-changes his or her students of a complete musical experience and would benefit from a broader preparation in the various aspects of a well-rounded music

Meredith, V. (2007). "Knowing" strengthened by "knowing about": A reflection precipitated by Jonathan G. Bayley's "Music education in Saskatchewan: An outsider's perspective." In K. Veblen & C. Beynon (Eds. with S. Horsley, U. DeAlwiss, & A. Heywood), *From Sea to Sea: Perspectives on Music Education in Canada*. Retrieved from <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/musiceducationebooks/1/>

education. This extreme performance-based teacher also does his or her students the disservice of instilling in them the notion that music is mostly about winning. Just as neither extreme is complete in practice, these extremes are also insufficient in teacher knowledge and preparation.

It is interesting that Saskatchewan proposes “to enable students to understand and value arts expressions throughout life” as the only goal within what appears to lean toward a generalist arts curriculum. Studies in Continuity Theory indicate that those people who continue to be involved in music throughout their entire lives, either as performers or supporters, are most often individuals who were engaged in the performance of music early in their lives. Interesting examples of this phenomenon are discussed in George Wise, et al, “Exploration of the Relationship Between Choral Singing and Successful Aging” (Psychological Reports 70, 1992) and also in Chorus America’s 2003 national study, “America’s Performing Art: A Study of Choruses, Choral Singers, and Their Impact.”

Some years ago I had the privilege of being invited to develop and initiate a choral music program at an accredited private high school where music had not previously been part of the curriculum. When I began to devise the program, and wanting to be certain that offerings would be in line with any regulations for accreditation, I sought the input of the Ministry of Education’s Music Inspector and Regional Consultant, Lansing MacDowell. This astute gentleman gave me the wisest advice he could offer as he counseled me to “assess the needs of your students and then figure out the best way to go about meeting them.” The result was a predominantly performance-based program that included sight-singing, music theory and composition, music history, attendance at

Meredith, V. (2007). “Knowing” strengthened by “knowing about”: A reflection precipitated by Jonathan G. Bayley’s “Music education in Saskatchewan: An outsider’s perspective.” In K. Veblen & C. Beynon (Eds. with S. Horsley, U. DeAlwiss, & A. Heywood), *From Sea to Sea: Perspectives on Music Education in Canada*. Retrieved from <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/musiceducationebooks/1/>

live concerts, learning to listen analytically to and appreciate music of a variety of styles and to discuss it in an informed manner. At any given time, about half of the student body participated in the music program.

To me (and I am certain that many colleagues in the profession share these attitudes and experiences), the true sign of the program's success for any year's graduating class was not in how many students became music majors at university, although some did, but rather in the pleasure shown by students who went on to study other fields when they joined a choir or took a music course for their elective. Inevitably, a few years later would come the requests for copies of certain favourite pieces that had become a meaningful part of their musical "knowing" so that they could be used in upcoming weddings. Now, twenty-some years later, I continue to value the occasional e-mail message telling me that these same former students are again singing in a choir because they needed more balance in their lives and that their own children are involved in making music with the hope that they, too, will find a meaningful musical experience that will stay with them for a lifetime.